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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the positive influences of folk literature on children and the basis of its appeal to them. Sections focus on how traditional literature can be used to develop the child's language ability, critical thinking, value comprehension and sense of humor. The clear-cut structure, characters and language, and the brief and pointed plots of traditional children's literature are contrasted with complex stories, conflicting characters and violent action found in television programs. Similarities between characteristics of children as described by Piaget and characteristics of fairy tales are indicated. In conclusion, five basic values are defined and several ways to help children acquire enduring values in a context of rapid change are suggested. (Author/RH)

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FROM AESOP TO CHARLIE BROWN: CROSS-CULTURAL VALUES IN TRADITIONAL LITERATURE

An awareness workshop for teachers of young children

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Association for Childhood Education International

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ABSTRACT

AESOP TO CHARLIE BROWN: CROSS-CULTURAL VALUES IN TRADITIONAL LITERATURE

by

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The value system of today's children is an area of concern to many parents and educators. While traditional literature (ancient fables, Bible stories, nursery rhymes, fairy stories) have provided generations of children with opportunities for personal problem-solving and resolution of human dilemmas, today's young child is widely exposed to influences not available to the child of yesterday. The media, especially TV, has had an, as yet, basically undetermined impact and influence on recent generations of children.

Values presented through the media may or may not reinforce family values and the child viewing alone, as so many do, may be helped to incorporate these vicarious experiences into his family value system in a positive way by the conscious, informed effort of his parents, teachers, and other caring individuals. Specific ways teachers and parents may help the child deal with conflicts and dissonance he may experience from exposure to TV and other media will be considered and discussed by participants in the workshop.

AESOP TO CHARLIE BROWN: CROSS-CULTURAL VALUES IN TRADITIONAL LITERATURE

by

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The value system of today's children appears to be an area of concern to few people. We see around us changing moral assumptions and practices and "the older generation", as it always has, shakes its head in consternation and dispair with comments such as, "What is the world coming to?" or "It wasn't like this in my day". However, the professional literature has shown increasing concern about this matter in recent months. Articles appear frequently in the media which itself is often a target of the most severe criticism and blame. A recent KAPPAN (February, 1979) quoted the well-known and widely-traveled Rev. Jesse Jackson's speech at the annual meeting of the Washington-based Council of Chief State School Officers on this matter. He said:

> "A steady diet of violence, vandalism, drugs, a teen-age pregnancy epidemic, alcohol, and TV addiction have bred a passive, alienated, and superficial generation. The death of ethics is the sabotage of excellence. There is no such thing as value-free education; non values are values, but they are values leading to social decay."

The Rev. Mr. Jackson sees the media...records, TV, and films...as being a major contributor to our current societal decadence. He feels that the media programs values into our children and exerts far more impact on them than does the combined efforts of the home, church, and school. If this is true, and our own observations may lead us to agree with the Rev. Mr. Jackson, we may consider some of the factors that are contributing to a conflict of values for today's children. While reasons are numerous, many may be characterized as CHANGE of various kinds. In recent years, we have seen increasing:

> ...CHANGE in families (father absent, mother working, children increasingly cared for in day care and other situations away from their homes, smaller families, increased mobility of young families often involving separation from close relatives, suburban living, frequent moves from place to place, etc.)

...CHANGE in life styles (newspaper reading has declined, school staying has increased with more people continuing into college, increased mobility has caused expansion of tastes and interests away from basically ethonocentric concerns to more international ones, etc.)

...CHANGE in schools (rapid and frequent changes in school curriculum with English and literature courses no longer required, foreign languages dropped altogether in many schools, increased study of other cultures, education for everyone, bussing, more well-educated teachers in some areas, basic changes in school structure with the "invention" of middle school grades, special teachers, trend away from self-contained classrooms with one teacher for all subjects, etc.)

...CHANGE in literature (basal readers are more colorful and interesting with stories rewritten, textbooks reflect more awareness of the diversity of the population, increasing numbers of magazines for children and books written especially for children, new subjects such as death and sex for even the youngest ones, etc.)

The list could go on and on when one considers those changes which especially affect the young child in today's society. We might see many of these changes as positive and good for him while also identifying negative elements which conflict with traditional values and family aspirations. Our collective past and out shared heritage have been expressed in such traditional literature as Aesop, the Bible, Mother Goose and other traditional rhymes, folktales and fairy stories, European and early American "classics", and popular literature of more recent years. What would happen to "traditional American values" if this literary heritage were lost to present and future generations?

AESOP

The ancient wisdom embodied in the fables of Aesop is as meaningful today to children who know them as they were to generations of children in the past. These fables contain brief, clearly-defined characters in simple dilemma situations which are swiftly resolved with a clear hero or victor and an easily-identified loser or "baddie". As the child hears the fable, he can identify with the animal characters in their human-type situations and may, in his own mind, work through the dilemma to a reasonable conclusion. This

helps the child deal with similar dilemmas in his own experience. However, if he should miss the point, the fable ends with a clear, didactic summary statement or MORAL.

While most of us have been familiar with the fable of "The Hare and the Tortoise" from early childhood, many of today's children do not know it and may thus be missing an opportunity for personal problem-resolution. As he hears the fable the child may worry about the hare as he arrogantly procrastinates while the steady, plodding tortoise plugs along. Then, because he identifies with the less likely victor, he cheers for and ultimately rejoices with the tortoise as he wins the "impossible" race through his own steady efforts. Children seem to be close to animals, especially pets to whom they talk and from whom they usually receive an instant response. They are probably not convinced that human-like thoughts are unlikely in the natural realm of animals such as rabbits and tortoises. The actions of the animals in this particular fable are appropriate while the thoughts attributed to them are improbable.

DAVID AND GOLIATH

In the Bible account of David, the young shepherd boy who killed Goliath, the giant, with his slingshot and one small rock, the child can identify with a pure child hero. David became a national hero when he conquered the enemy in a brave and calm, yet simple, fashion. The helpless adults of his nation had been unable, to that point, in spite of their size, power, and weapons, to overcome the opposing army. Young children throughout the years have thrilled to this story, identifying with humble young boy who accomplished a great deed because he was GOOD and had SUPERNATURAL approval.

TRADITIONAL FOLK LITERATURE AND CHILDREN

Bernice Cullinan (1977) states that there is a strong connection between young children and traditional literature, particularly folk literature and

nursery rhymes, and that children seem to have "a natural affinity for that body of literature." Charlotte Huck (1968) substantiates something that parents and teachers often see in the interests of young children as they become acquainted with traditional literature, by proposing that the developmental stages of children's thinking described by Piaget, and the characteristics of folklore, coincide. She agrees with Piaget that the preoperational child (aged two to seven years) thinks thoughts based largely on perception and is usually unable to apply or generalize that perception to other situations or to deal with more than one aspect at a time in the situation he confronts. Therefore, the young child is not yet able to handle complex relationships or to deal with abstractions. He may have some difficulty even remembering the characters in a story if there are too many or keeping up with the sequence of a story if there are a number of events in the story. This may help explain why cumulative folktales in which each event from the beginning is repeated throughout the story (i.e. "This is the House that Jack Built" and "The Gingerbread Boy") are so appealing to young children. The retelling of events in the cumulative story brings all events continually into the present moment of the story, building an almost visible picture as elements of the story are repeated and reinforced as the story progresses. The child thus "gets the point" of the story clearly and in a manner most appropriate to his way of thinking.

Piaget (1970) has described the preoperational child as being unable to conserve, causing many to have trouble with seriation and sequence. Therefore, stories in which the characters have increasing size ("The Three Bears", "The Three Billy Goats Gruff", etc.) are most interesting and appropriate for the young child. There are many threes in folk tales; three characters, three events, three gradations in size necessary to presentation of the story, and/or three shifts in the action of the story. Children's favorites ("Goldilocks and the

Three Bears", "The Three Little Pigs", etc.) follow this classic pattern and may be thought of as transitional literature between rhymes of the nursery and other folklore, presenting the story in a way most meaningful to the child as his thinking develops.

Some people also see the preoperational child as ANIMISTIC, a term we often use in describing the prescientific people who created and passed on the fairy tales. Events that were difficult for them to understand or explain were then thought to be the result of magical powers with unusual creatures such as dragons, witches, trolls, elves, and the like playing important roles in these stories. Children find these creatures exciting and believable, just as they may have been to the simple, superstituous ancients who carried these stories in the oral tradition long before the brothers Grimm, or others, attempted to record them in writing. This literature may, then, be tuned appropriately to the pre-operational child's level of thought and value formation Cullinan says that:

> "Children alter their beliefs and behavior as interactions between their inner schemata and the outer world demand it, but during this stage, they see great appeal in a body of literature geared to their level of thought."

Bettleheim (1976) supports the perpetuation of folk and fairy tales saying that they are crucial for the psychological development of the child, helping him to overcome psychological and emotional insecurities by suggesting images for his fantasies. Bettleheim describes the tales as a "magic mirror" reflecting the inner fears and fantasies that children commonly have. In these old tales, good overcomes evil, the weak and small win through perseverance, and justice prevails. It is often the smallest child, the youngest character, the smallest animal, or the least strong or competent who succeeds in the folk tale. Thus, power does not seem to cancel out goodness, virture, faithfulness, etc. in the stories. The young child, who commonly feels a lack of power, may find comfort in knowing that he, too, may ultimately win in a world where everyone else seems

bigger and stronger. It is clear in traditional literature that good will triumph over evil.

Characters in folk tales and other traditional literature are clearly drawn, to the point of being stereotypes and may not appear to the adult reader, to be fully developed characters. They are all good or all bad. While the good characters may make a mistake, no evil was intended, but the bad or evil ones do not have redeeming characteristics or engage in well-intended actions. These folk characters, embodying virtue or vice, represent symbols for goodness and purity,or greed and wickedness, with no ambiguities. This makes it clear to the child what the role and the intention of the character is. His motives will be clearly good or bad, leading the child to recognize easily who should be punished and who should be rewarded. This distinction may not be as clear in the television stories to which the child is exposed where Kojak may intend to hurt or Bugs Bunny to blow up the road in front of his pursuer. This may cause the child some difficulty in separating good (positive values) from bad (negative values) in these characters, especially if there is no one to help him at this point, to answer his questions, and to suggest alternative ways of dealing with the dilemmas presented in the story.

VALUES IN TRADITIONAL LITERATURE

Values presented simply and clearly throughout traditional literature are that GOOD WILL WIN and that the SMALLEST, YOUNGEST, WEAKEST, OR LEAST COMPETENT, through VIRTURE AND GOODNESS, with a bit of magic or supernatural intervention, will PREVAIL, and may ultimately WIN. The way to this triumph may be hard and filled with trials and tests, but the characters are sustained by the hope of future success. These stories thus convey commonly honored middle-class values which subtly reassure the child and influence his moral development because virtue pays off in these stories. Bettleheim (1976) says that:

> "Fairy tales, unlike any other form of literature, direct the child to discover his identity and calling, and they also suggest what experiences are needed to develop his character further...intimate that a rewarding, good life is within one's reach despite adversity...but only if one does not shy away from the hazardous struggles without which one can never achieve true identity. These stories promise that if a child dares to engage in this fearsome and taxing search, benevolent powers will come to his aid, and he will succeed."

The young child, basically optimistic and expecting good things to happen, still has fears which he cannot express or fully understand. Therefore, folklore, because it comes from the accumulated human experience, gives "body and form" to these fears and deals with them in ways that the young child can accept. He may identify with the characters and events in the stories, resolving his own fears and anxieties. The form of the fairy tale, with its happy ending and fairy godmother or other super-human creature looking out for him, leads inevitably to a happy ending with good triumphant, virture rewarded, and evil punished. Bad and evil characters are destroyed with uncompromising justice which is understood and expected by the young child. Even the apparent violence in much of this traditional lore may have value, according to Cullinan (1978):

> "The frightening parts in folk and fairy tales heighten the drama and add to the suspense, but children know that things will turn out all right. They are sure that witches will be pushed into ovens, that trolls will be beaten, and that wolves will be caught. The children who are snuggled safely in an adult's lap while they hear such terrifying events are not really scared. They ask for such stories to be repeated time and time again, enjoying the shivers while they wait for the anticipated ending when all is well."

VALUE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH TRADITIONAL LITERATURE

Traditional literature, adopted by the child as his own, presents clear-cut structure, characters, and language with dramatic dilemmas of the tale

stated briefly and pointedly with no confusing side issues or substories. While they present a simplistic view of the world, this is acceptable and appropriate to the young child. He can comprehend and identify with the plight of the Gingerbread Boy who must run as fast as he can to get away from those who would destroy him. The child has had fantasies and perhaps actual experiences of this nature (chased by dogs, larger children, etc.); Rumpelstiltskin insists that the queen guess his name, an impossible task in his eyes, or he will kidnap her child (a common fear of the young child is being separated from his mother by forces more powerful than either of them); Hansel and Gretel must get away from the old witch or she will eat them (a child's fear that he may die if he is away from the loving protection of his home and parents and his fear that the world may be full of those from whom he needs protection). All of these plots are short and direct and their definitive conclusion appeals to the child's sense of finality with all coming out all right in the end. The commonly stated, "...and they all lived happily ever after" appeals to us all and is especially reassuring to the young child. As one reads to the child, holding him on your lap, one senses and may actually feel his relaxation at this phrase after the delightful, excited tension of the story. One might ask if the child viewing scarey stories on TV, far from the comforting lap and reassuring carress of the caring adult would feel this sense of relaxation and "...happy ever after" relief that the young listener/reader feels at the conclusion of the traditional story. If we wish him to develop strong sense of JUSTICE, it is perhaps essential that he have an acquaintance with events which seem rewarded and end with everything "all right." A society which values RIGHT and wants to eliminate WRONG, and attempts to teach its young the difference between these two, might find this commonly held value reinforced in traditional literature.

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Folk tales are customarily presented in appealing language similar to that which the child uses and are thus "tempered to the tongue" because they have come from the oral tradition. The language is direct and conversational, leading the listener to feel that the story is directed at him. Unnecessary details have been lost in the process of the oral tradition. Repeated retelling and personal adaptations of the storyteller have brought the story to the present time preserving only those elements crucial to understanding. Contrast this with the elaborately presented stories on television with conversational, mundane dialogue, even in the presentation of the "classics" or the "Disney rape" of traditional literature, and we have an entirely different impact on the child. The oral tradition has resulted in phrases easily committed to memory and language devices which aid the child in retelling the tale. There are clues to jog the storyteller's memory and phrases which almost repeat themselves:

> "First, she tasted Poppa Bear's porridge: it was too HOT. Then she tasted Momma Bear's porridge; it was too COLD. Then she tasted Baby Bear's porridge, and it was just RIGHT. So she ate it all up!"

The child will probably join in as he hears this story. Children are intrigued by the refrains and will insist that the storyteller stick with the story as they know it, never seeming to tire of hearing it again and again. They will mimic the Gingerbread Boy as the story unfolds:

> "Run, run, as fast as you can. You can't catch me, I'm the Gingerbread Man. I ran away from the little old woman. I ran away from the little old man. And I can run away from you, I can, I can!"

Children may repeat the refrain after one hearing, responding to and delighting in the rhyme and the rhythm of the words. The repetition of phrases and events in the story appeals to them. Contrast this to the language of the cartoons, and even Charlie Brown, and we may see that something important has been lost

for the language development of today's young child. If we want the child to value LANGUAGE and its appropriate usage in all the language arts...listening, reading, writing, and speaking...what more appropriate experience can we give him than exposing him to the meaningful use of words in literature?

DEVELOPING A SENSE OF HUMOR

Folk tales make children laugh, encouraging a sense of humor and the use of their imaginations. The stories in which the child is in on the joke and those in which he knows better than to do the ridiculous things that the silly hero does help him to know what is serious and what is humerous because it is ridiculous Cullinan says that:

> "The magic of words and pictures in folk and fairy tales creates new images and feeds children's insatiable curiosity. The old tales make visible to the inward eye things that the child wonders and fantasizes about; they encourage dreaming and fantasizing about the world that each child will conquer, allowing children to imagine what might be rather than leaving them in the realistic world of what is."

In today's society, a sense of humor is greatly admired and rewarded as is a well-developed imagination or an imaginative approach to life. If these tales help the child to develop a balance between aspiration and everyday reality, he will be better equipped to deal with daily living. Our society values and admires those who handle "reality" well.

DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING

Dorothy S. Strickland (1978) says that the child's ability to analyze problems, to explore solutions, and to see relationships in proper perspective is a necessary attribute for success in and out of school and that the development of basic concepts is directly related to this ability. In speaking of the child's experience with literature through books, she states that:

> "Young children who have rich verbal and cognitive experiences with books are given a head start toward developing these abilities...Expereinces with books that are thoughtfully planned to promote active verbal exchanges of ideas will have lasting positive effects upon both the communicative mode and the cognitive structure of the child."

TELEVISION AND VALUE DEVELOPMENT

If education and the ability to read and solve problems is as important to our children as we seem to think, one may ask what similar effects viewing television for extended amounts of time is having on children today? Does viewing complex stories involving conflicting characters, and violent action help the child toward verbal and cognitive experiences? And what are the values presented in these stories?

In our studies concerning the acquaintance of young children with Mother Goose Rhymes and with current media characters (Christenberry & Ewing, 1978), we found that while the children in our studies could identify forty-two percent of the Mother Goose rhymes presented to them, ninety-seven percent of them could identify Snoopy and Donald Duck, ninety-six percent knew Mickey Mouse and eighty-nine percent knew Charlie Brown. These commonly presented Disney and Schultz characters, found even on their clothes, bedsheets, and toothbrushes as well as on the television screen and in books, may be assumed then to have an influence on the children who are familiar with them. What values are presented to the child through these characters? What is the character's characteristic way of dealing with dilemmas and feelings? How closely does the child identify with these characters and their problems? Do these cartoon characters, with stories more appropriate for adult dilemmas than for those commonly faced by children, really help the child with problem resolution and/or provide role models for positive value clarification and example?

Contrast the inward creation promoted by the traditional literature to the world of today's child with his Saturday morning diet of cartoons and advertisements with visually presented fantasy largely indistinguishable for the young child from actual events, and one may find the experience of today's child quite different from those of yesterday's child. The child repeatedly views heroes

who appear no less villianous than the villian; common people helpless in the face of powerful institutions or weapons; and children pictured as objects of ridicule and/or exploitation, usually less powerful than others in the story (even in "Little House on the Prairie"). One might reasonably ask what is happening to the child's value and psychological development when this is what he is presented regularly through television in his home and even at school.

APPROPRIATE AGES FOR TRADITIONAL LITERATURE

Favat (1977), referring to various research studies, substantiates the finding that children's interest in fairy tales emerges and declines between the ages of five and ten years with the point of highest interest occurring between the ages of six and eight. There appear to be many similarities between the characteristics of children as described by Piaget and the characteristics of the fairy tales of Perrault, the Grimms, and Anderson, all commonly known in our society. In fact, when we look closely, we find that the characteristics of the fairy tales correspond precisely with the characteristics Piaget (1967) ascribes to young children during these years.

1. Children believe in magic. Piaget defines this as meaning the use individuals believe they can make of participation in order to modify reality. Children believe that an object or place can be used to influence another object and may perform some action believing that it exercises an influence on a particular event they either desire or fear. (They may not walk on the lines of the pavement or touch every fencepost or parking meter along their route as a sort of magic ritual to influence something happen that they wish to happen.)
2. Children appear to think that they can exert magic of their own. Piaget noted that some actions have a specific origin such as a child's drawing his blanket over his head to protect himself (hide) from fears of

the dark or from strange sounds. This eventually becomes dissociated from the original context and becomes a rite acquiring an intrinsic, magical value of its own.

What does this mean as the child deals with current stories and depictions of fantasy to which he is exposed? Does he envision that he can influence what happens on TV? How does he feel when it appears that his ritual and/or thought did not influence the characters? While he may draw his own conclusions in literature (stop reading and/or listening to the story) how is he to escape the predetermined ending of the TV story; or distinguish it from the commercials interspersed with the story?

Values embodied in the experience of the child may vary with his experiences, but his nature remains constant over socioeconomic and geographical distances. Piaget has described the young child as egocentric, brought about by certain conditions of the child and his world. Part of this is caused by the child's own activity. He may experience a lack of differentiation between consciousness of the actions of himself on his self, and the consciousness of the action of self on things. His mind does not distinguish self from the external world. Piaget (1967) says that the child sees his parents like parts of his own body which can be moved in continual response to his desires. Even during middle childhood, the child still lives with the impression that his thoughts, aims, and desires are known and shared by those around him. How does this influence his impressions gained from TV? Does he feel that the characters on the screen can indeed hear and know his thoughts or recognize him when they meet face to face? What is his inner reaction when they continue behavior disturbing and puzzling to him or in conflict with the values and ideas presented by his parents, family, teachers, and community?

BASIC VALUES IN A CHANGING WORLD

Nell W. Clem (1971) addresses the questions of basic values in a changing world, which aptly describes the world in which today's children live and grow. She states that five basic values might guide us as we consider others related to them:

1. HUMANITY: The uniqueness of man as a person is a basic value that must be preserved. Life must have worth. Man must have dignity. He must be genuinely human. There must be justice and love.

2. HONOR: A respect for all creation, a rediscovery of what and who we are in relation to the universe is a basic value that must be preserved. The earth supports us in beauty and has order. We must develop an understanding of the orderly relation between living organisms and their environment and a respect for all aspects of creation.

3. HONESTY: Openness to truth and a continuing search for truth in a constantly changing world is a basic value that must be preserved. Minds must be open.

4. HERITAGE: It is necessary that we understand our background in order to project our future, then accept new truths and ideas, and reject out-moded beliefs tempered with a respect for the past.

5. HEAVEN: The pull of an ideal, the dream of better things is a basic value that must be preserved, we must have goals, visions and ideals.

WHAT SHALL WE DO

In the face of the obvious dilemma confronting us and our children as we consider the development of these and other values for our children, several steps seem to be clear.

1. Help children to recognize values and worthwhile ideas in both literature and media presentations to which they are exposed. This means not only

reading to children, telling them stories, but viewing TV with them so that we may help resolve conflicts or confusion in values and provide immediate feedback.

2. Provide a positive model for children in teaching and living values we wish to teach. "What you do speaks so loudly I can't hear what you are saying" is still powerfully true.

3. Support young children as they attempt to work through their own limited understanding and attempts to find resolution for their own fears, questions, dilemmas, and assist in their growth process, helping the child to find his own resolutions whenever possible.

4. Become increasingly aware of the values to which the child is being exposed in his current environment, both at home and at school, through textbooks, TV, radio, records, etc. If we are truly conscious of some of these values and become aware of their impact on children, we can better deal with the child's questions.

5. Actively support better presentation of good literature both in the media and in the schools while providing good books at home; view TV with your child whenever possible and be available to help him reflect on the meaning of the program.

Above all, we, as caring adults, may study, consider and discuss this matter with all interested parents and teachers. As we become increasingly aware of the power of both traditional literature and the media, perhaps we can better deal with its impact on our children, leading them toward positive, meaningful life-long values.

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